

Father Ronald Ketteler serves as Director of Ecumenism and of Continuing Education of Priests, Episcopal Liaison to the diocesan newspaper, the Messenger. He is also former Chair of the Humanities Division at Thomas More College. These columns appeared originally in the Messenger.



Pluralism—Consensus or Relativism?

Is there a public philosophy? In other words, what ethical constants are essential for formulating an adequate response to the classic question of politics: "How ought we to live our life together?"

On the national scene, theologians, philosophers, historians, and other public thinkers have been preoccupied with the question of a public philosophy for decades. As a matter of fact, while the debate continues to be a neuralgic issue, it is one that has become especially intensified in the aftermath of the cultural revolution of the late 1960s.

Among critics of cultural status quo in the West, Alasdair MacIntyre's *After Virtue* (1981) remains a cogent philosophical critique of the erosion of a normative ethic of "the classical tradition." Its displacement by the relativism of the "Enlightenment Project" is a shift which has radically revised the starting point for establishing social morality.

A traditional normative ethic framed the pivotal question of political philosophy in this fashion, "*How can we together pursue the common good?*" Professor MacIntyre contends that a postmodern cultural context has reformulated that question according to criteria drawn from rival and incompatible assumptions: "*How can we pursue our private interests with the least interference?*" This latter perspective relegates to the state the task of providing "the arena in which each individual seeks his or her own private good."

In reality, whether or not the identity of society is constituted by a "thick" consensus on the meaning of the common good is a position that has important ramifications in a society for its public policies, for its institutions, and for the culture at large. Moreover, since a public philosophy serves as the moral foundation for a civic culture, it sets forth the moral constants which link

rights with responsibilities as well as a shared commitment to the common good.

The September/October 2006 issue of *American Interest* published Peter L. Berger's analysis of relativism and fundamentalism, two conflicting currents of cultural, political, and religious outlooks which presently enjoy a high profile on the political horizon.

Professor Berger, a noted sociologist of religion and culture from Boston University, judges that both phenomena represent ideologies which stand at opposite ends on the spectrum of the culture wars.

On the one hand, relativism, in its denial of absolutes, blocks access to moral and philosophical truths that stand as normative. Fundamentalism, on the other hand, often exercises a militant and uncompromising advocacy of absolute truth or truths.

Two incompatible formulas idiomatically symbolize the stances of relativism and fundamentalism: "Let's agree to disagree" versus "You just don't get it." The "thin" consensus of the first dictum dismisses "moral condemnation of virtually anything at all." The polar opposite of fundamentalism creates "irresolvable conflict with those who do not share its beliefs."

In his sustained analysis of the issues, an effort to establish a middle-ground between these extremes, Professor Berger delineates elements needed for forming a new normative agenda. The viability of such an agenda is crucial since a functional society needs a "certain degree of normative consensus, lest it fall apart." Otherwise, there exists a risk that modern totalitarianisms, whether from the left or the right, will swiftly fill up the values vacuum created by the absence of an adequate normative consensus in society.

From a sociological standpoint, moral judgments (e.g. the evil of slavery or torture) can enjoy "a high degree of

The Catholic Conference of Kentucky (CCK) is an agency of the Catholic Bishops of Kentucky, established in 1968. It speaks for the Church in matters of public policy, serves as liaison to government and the legislature, and coordinates communications and activities between the church and secular agencies. There are 406,000 Catholics in the Commonwealth. The Bishops of the four dioceses of KY constitute CCK's Board of Directors.

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certainty” and withstand “relativization.” In Professor Berger’s view, then, pluralism is “a situation in which different ethnic or religious groups co-exist under conditions of civic peace and interact with each other socially.”

From a theological perspective, a vital civic culture requires a foundation built on a vision of essential truths about the good of the human person in community. The conditions for an authentic pluralism become threatened when public discourse shifts away from the rhetoric of the “public good” in lieu of shared beliefs and ethical ideals as the basis for making “moral sense.” In that sort of cultural milieu, there is a heightened risk that dialogue will evolve into a “dialogue of the deaf” which, in turn, would bring about the “death of civility.”

In a word, when a substantive consensus on core ideals and common convictions erodes, the possibility of an ordered conversation about the goals of life in community not only wanes but becomes problematic.

In an analysis of the relationship of faith and civility, Cardinal Avery Dulles, S.J., offers a corrective to the far too common ideological misunderstanding attached to the term “pluralism.” He explains:

Pluralism is frequently promoted on the ground that every group should be encouraged to cultivate its own traditions and values. A society is by definition, however, an association of people who have a common goal. Unless we have some common convictions about reality and some common standards of decency, we cannot agree on what is right and wrong, what is permitted and what is forbidden, what is desirable and what is to be avoided.

Authentic pluralism is grounded in a consensus regarding principles and common ideals.

Cardinal Dulles invokes several concrete examples that point to the correlative collapse of civility in society:

When common standards are lacking, dialogue breaks down. People cannot reason with one another, because they have no common premises and no shared universe of discourse. How can I reason with another person about what ought to be believed and done unless we have some common starting point and principles of argument? ... Likewise, if two of us have radically disparate political philosophies, we are in no position to debate about the merits of different candidates and plat-

forms.

Without a consensus rooted in principles various groups in society risk becoming “spiritual aliens if not enemies to another.” A number of divisive conditions develop: berating and attacking supplant “reasoning together,” passion and prejudice substitute for “reasoned discourse,” and “personal invective and defamation of character” replace logic. In a word, the civility needed to sustain a democratic republic becomes endangered. [Avery Dulles. “Faith and Civility,” *Josephinum Journal of Theology* 11:2 (2004): 216-225 at 216-217.]

The transition from a “society of moral friends” to a “society of moral strangers” or of “spiritual aliens” is especially noticeable in the area of bioethics. Father J. Bryan Hehir, a well-known expert on Church social teaching and public policy, recognizes a new dilemma that the Church currently faces in carrying out its teaching ministry on social issues. The traditional dialogic approach of identifying common ground based on a natural law strategy is becoming more troublesome. Cultural changes have widened the distance “between our ability to advocate common ground on social, political, and economic issues and our capacity to share moral wisdom on bioethical and sexual issues.” [J. Bryan Hehir, “Can the Church Convincingly Engage American Culture?” *Church* 20:1 (Spring 2004): 5-10.]

Robert P. George, McCormick Professor of Jurisprudence and director of the James Madison Program in American Ideals at Princeton University, lines up the present “contest of world-views,” which surfaces in “disputes over abortion, embryo-destructive research, and euthanasia, as well as in issues of sex, marriage, and family life.” Ultimately, the root causes of such controversies stem from incompatible philosophical differences about “the nature of morality and the proper relation of moral judgment to law and public policy.”

Because “fundamental and nonnegotiable issues of justice are at stake,” Professor George argues that “merely procedural solutions are not good enough.” [Robert P. George, “Public Reason, Public Morality,” *First Things* No. 167 (November 2006):2126.]

The United States Catholic Catechism for Adults (2006) succinctly defines relativism as “[t]he position that there is no objective truth, only subjective opinions.” [Glossary: 525]

The phrase—“dictatorship of relativism”—had been adopted by Cardinal Joseph Ratzinger in his homily on April 18, 2005, the opening day of the

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conclave following the death of Pope John Paul II. In Chapter 6 of his *The Rise of Benedict XVI*, "Battling a 'Dictatorship of Relativism,'" John L. Allen, Jr. comments that the now Pope Benedict XVI's remark "was a summary statement of one of the core concerns of his life, and given that he did not expect or desire to be elected pope, it was also a carefully chosen expression of his own theological legacy."

In 1996, a meeting of the Congregation of the Doctrine of the Faith was held with the Presidents of the Doctrinal Commissions of the Bishops' Conferences of Latin America in Guadalajara, Mexico. At that conference, Cardinal Ratzinger, then Prefect of the CDF delivered a major address entitled "Relativism: The Problem For Faith Today." His lectures and articles on the theological challenge of pluralism and truth at the interreligious level have been printed in *Truth and Tolerance: Christian Belief and World Religion*. (Ignatius Press, 2003).

But, the hegemony of relativism also becomes a harbinger of controversy in the arena of politics in the broad sense. In addition to being a central problem for faith today, relativism inextricably spills over the socio-political order.

In that 1996 article, Cardinal Ratzinger denies that a prerequisite component of relativism due for the creation of "a freely ordered common life" can be absolute. Hence he stated:

Even in the realm of politics, of course, one cannot always manage with absolute relativism: there are things that are wrong and can never become right (killing innocent people, for instance; denying individuals the right to be treated as humans and to a way of life appropriate to that); there are things that are right and can never become wrong.

Although a certain degree of relativism is a precondition in the sphere of politics and society, that claim cannot be unlimited or absolute.

Cardinal Ratzinger had become an indefatigable voice in the defense of religious and ethical values as the foundation of democracy. His thought on the need for democratic societies to recapture shared essential truths and values to sustain civic unity and to protect inviolable human rights can be extensively documented from his previous writings.

One such collection of the present Holy Father's earlier lectures and articles, *Values in a Time of Upheaval* (2006), develops his suppositions on the moral foundation of Judeo-Christian values in a pluralistic and multicultural world.

In "What is Truth? - The Significance of Religious and Ethical Values in a Pluralistic Society" (1992), to cite one example, Pope Benedict XVI set forth a metaphysical and Christian thesis (the antithesis of "skeptical relativism") as the condition of democracy.

In this earlier article, similar to his stance in the above-mentioned 1996 address, the Holy Father observed that there exists an in-built tension in modern society "between freedom as the existential form of democracy and the contents of democracy (i.e., law and the good), and contemporary struggles to discover the right form of democracy, and indeed of political life as a whole." Such struggles are efforts "to find the right balance in this tension."

Consequently, the Holy Father noted that the concept of "truth" de facto "has moved into the zone of anti-democratic intolerance." The implications of that shift are profound, for the "public good" is reduced to a private matter and the identification of the good of some groups is "not the truth of society as a whole."

Nonetheless, even though modern democratic society is wedded to a relativism that guarantees freedom (especially religious liberty and freedom of conscience), a significant question must still be posed: "Must there not be a non-relativistic kernel in democracy too?" After all, democracy has the responsibility to uphold the inviolable human rights of its citizens, rights that constitute "the very substance of tolerance and freedom." Ethical truth is an integral and essential dimension to democratic life.

In the summation and conclusions of his exploration of the issue, Pope Benedict XVI argues that the purpose of government is not to establish "a freedom without contents." Rather, if a state is to enjoy political viability and good order, there must exist "a minimum of truth, of knowledge of the good, that cannot be manipulated."

In this regard, the Holy Father alludes to an insight of St. Augustine, namely, that a society that lacks the foundation of substantive truth at its core "will sink to the level of a smoothly functioning band of robbers." Without such a core, the political community would be defined in purely functional terms, "not on the basis of that justice which is good for everyone."

Thus to redefine political activity on purely functional grounds is to supplant an objective moral order ("truth") with majority rule. The Holy Father judges that democracy would be reduced to "the mechanisms of election and vot-

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ing.”

Pope Benedict XVI repeats that provocative insight from St. Augustine in his inaugural encyclical *Deus Caritas Est* (“God is Love,” 2005) in his discussion of justice. The Holy Father identifies “the just ordering of society and the State” as an essential responsibility of the political sphere. He states: “Justice is both the aim and intrinsic criterion of all politics. Politics is more than a mere mechanism for defining the rules of public life; its origin and its goal are found in justice, which by its very nature has to do with ethics.” (DCE n. 26)

In the light of this distinction, the Holy Father notes that “[t]he Church’s social teaching argues on the basis of reason and natural law, namely, on the basis of what is in accord with the nature of every human being.” The Church’s proper role in political life centers on the formation of consciences and in providing “greater insight into the authentic requirements of justice as well as greater readiness to act accordingly, even when this might involve conflict with situations of personal interest.”

In this regard, the Church’s distinctive contribution consists in the ecclesial duty to create an understanding of the demands of justice and commitment to achieving those ends in the political order by means of the purification of reason and ethical formation. (DCE n. 26)

The writings of Pope Benedict XVI on this question of justice and objective values bear a clear continuity with the prophetic humanism of the Pope John Paul II. Without doubt, in season and out of season, Pope Benedict XVI’s predecessor in the papal office had addressed the relationship of freedom to truth. The relationship of freedom to truth is a relationship which links rights with duties and places the exercise of freedom in the context of an objective moral order. That vision stands at odds with the encroaching “democratic totalitarianism” brought about by the erosion of the moral foundation of law and accompanied by the growing moral intolerance found in democratic societies.

Without doubt, the teachings of Pope John Paul II had consistently displayed a vigorous critical edge in his analysis of the culture of modern democracy. For instance, in the encyclical *Evangelium Vitae* (*The Gospel of Life*, 1995), the late Holy Father stated that democracy cannot be idolized to the point of making it “a substitute for morality or a panacea for immorality.” He further concluded that the meaning of democracy stands or falls with the values it embodies

and promotes. (EV n. 70)

In denying the existence of an objective moral order, relativism reduces moral values to mere creations of a given moral agent. In the long run, the consequent separation of rights and freedom from inherent duties erodes limiting moral boundaries which are dictated by objective ethical criteria. (EV n. 70)

Again, two years earlier, *Veritatis Splendor* (*The Splendor of Truth*, 1993), the encyclical on the foundations of Catholic moral teaching, had treated these specific themes in depth. There Pope John Paul II had spoken of a “crisis of truth” which was being brought on by the cultural eclipse of the transcendent order of values in favor of the subjectivism of absolute freedom. The elimination of universal moral norms redefines conscience to mean a strictly private source of ethical insight. That revisionist ideology grants to an individual’s judgment “the prerogative of independently determining the criteria of good and evil and then acting accordingly.” A subjectivist understanding moral judgment becomes “congenial to an individualistic ethic, wherein each individual is faced with his own truth, different from the truth of others.” In effect, if such a notion of conscience were drawn to its logical extreme, the ensuing individualism would eradicate “the very idea of human nature.” (VS n. 33)

On December 16, 1997, when receiving the credentials of the U.S. Ambassador to the Holy See, Pope John Paul II referred to the distinctive role of the United States in the building of a world of authentic peace and justice. In those comments, he stated: “The Founding Fathers of the United States asserted their claim to freedom and independence on the basis of certain ‘self-evident’ truths about the human person: truths which could be discerned in human nature, built into it by ‘nature’s God.’” That experiment in democracy presupposed an “ordered liberty” as the assurance of “equality of rights and opportunities in the pursuit of happiness and in service to the common good.”

Accordingly, the founders’ conception of authentic liberty entailed “moral responsibility and accountability;” authentic happiness stemmed from “respect and support for the natural units or groupings through which people exist, develop, and seek the higher purposes of life.”

In conclusion, Pope John Paul II raised a telling question: “Indeed it may be asked whether the American democratic experiment would have been possible, or how well it will succeed in the

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future, without a deeply rooted vision of divine providence over the individual and over the fate of nations." ["John Paul II on the American Experiment," *First Things* 82 (April 1998): 36-37.]

The late Holy Father's comments on that occasion raised an issue that overlaps with aspects of that protracted discussion on the American political scene about the viability of a public philosophy.

As previously mentioned, public thinkers have been grappling with the tension and conflict that at times dominate the cultural horizon over the issue of civic unity and the limits of toleration. Several such works sufficiently illustrate the state of the question, its complexity, and the ongoing challenge of pluralism.

In her *Democracy on Trial* (1995) Jean Bethke Elshtain, a professor of social ethics at the University of Chicago, refers to the evolution of "democracy by plebiscite." Professor Elshtain distinguishes "a democratic system" from "a plebiscitary system." The former is "sustained by debate and judgment." The latter, ("plebiscitary majoritarianism") can compatibly co-exist "with authoritarian politics carried out under the guise of, or with connivance of, majority opinion." The indispensable debate and judgment needed for sustaining a democratic system, a process rooted in commonly held essential convictions, becomes dispensable. As a result, the political technique of majority vote becomes the trump card over the norms of moral rights and wrongs.

In a similar vein, Father David Hollenbach, S.J., had surveyed the current status of the "culture wars" and the relation to the pursuit of the common good in his 1999 Santa Clara Lecture, "The Common Good in a Divided Society." Father Hollenbach, the Flatley Professor of Theology at Boston College, distilled the key insights of Pope John Paul II's emphasis on the social dimension of freedom as the ethical foundation of democracy.

In that 1999 lecture, Father Hollenbach notes that, even though Pope John Paul II supported a democratic polity, he had also targeted tough criticism at "democracy based on individualism and on strictly negative understandings of freedom." Moreover, in his judgment, the Holy Father's analysis is generally consistent with the political outlook of the founders of the American experience, namely, "that the success of democracy over the long haul is dependent on virtues and commitment to the common good."

As a corollary, Father Hollenbach contends that "[s]olitary individuals, especially solitary

individuals motivated solely by self-interest and the protection of their rights to privacy, will be incapable of self-government." A viable democracy needs distinctive civic virtues akin to Aristotle's "civic friendship," i.e., "the virtues of mutual cooperation" and of "mutual responsibility."

These virtues fall within the scope of that virtue which Pope John Paul II had practically elevated to a status on a par with the classic cardinal virtues—*solidarity*.

In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* (On Social Concern, 1987) the Holy Father called the *virtue of solidarity* "a firm and persevering determination to commit oneself to the *common good*; that is to say to the good of all and of each individual, because we are *all* really responsible *for all*." (SR n.38)

A few years later in 2002, Father Hollenbach published *The Common Good & Christian Ethics*, a comprehensive development of the issues and concepts of the précis sketched in his Santa Clara paper. This groundbreaking theological work maps out principles for recapturing a sense of the common good in a pluralistic society. The ending of the opening chapter, "The Eclipse of the Public," raises a series of probing questions about the ramifications involved with the eclipse of a vision of the common good in society at large:

Will a culture in which tolerance is the prime virtue generate a society good enough to sustain its citizens' loyalty over the long haul? Does avoiding judgments lead to an attenuated vision of what is possible by telling us never to say anything in public that others do not already agree with? If tolerance becomes a card that trumps all strong proposals on how we should live together, will it stifle the imagination needed to address pressing public problems?

Again, at the close of his work, Father Hollenbach highlights the need for regaining "a revitalized social commitment" to the common good. The implications in the contemporary world have a far-reaching impact beyond the social problems of urban poverty and the urban-suburban divide. The problems of global interdependence pose a radical choice that must be faced—between "a society based on reciprocal respect and solidarity and a society that leaves many people behind."

The Common Good & Christian Ethics continues the theological engagement with the American proposition at the national level which had been pioneered in *We Hold These Truths* (1960), an earlier seminal study of the late Father John Courtney Murray, S.J., (d. 1967). Father Murray

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ranks as a “theologian of the public order” with notable Protestant and Jewish thinkers from the mid-20th century such as Reinhold Niebuhr or Will Herberg.

According to Father Murray, the American democratic experiment was grounded in the theory of an “ethical, ordered liberty.” For example, in “Are There Two or One: The Question of the Future of Freedom,” the eminent theologian from the Jesuit theologate, Woodstock College, wrote: “In the twentieth century too, as the modern era runs out, the ancient monistic drive to a oneness of society, law and authority has also appeared in the totalitarianizing inherent in the contemporary idolatry of the democratic process.”

If that “idolatry of the democratic process” would prevail, Father Murray contended that “all the issues of human life—intellectual, religious, and moral issues as well as formally political issues—are to be regarded as, or resolved into political issues and are to be settled by the single omniscient political technique of majority vote.” Democratic monism, as at odds with a rich pluralism, becomes synonymous with a “political technique of majority vote.”

The “political technique of majority vote” constitutes what is currently called “a procedural republic.”

As Stephen J. Pope of Boston College has pointed out, the natural law component of Catholic social teaching promotes both “an ethic of the common good that counters the presupposition of utilitarian individualism” and upholds the virtue of solidarity as an essential dimension of life in community.

In “Democracy, Pluralism, and Catholic Teaching,” David Carroll Cochran explores the endorsement of democratic pluralism by Catholic social teaching. With regard to relativism, in particular, Cochran, the professor of politics at Loras College, states that Catholic social teaching

“counters the ethic of relativism that threatens to drain the world of faith, meaning, and public concern.” He observes that

[w]hile relativism turns people inward and away from moral concerns and public engagement, Catholic teaching is rooted in strong moral commitments to human dignity, freedom, equality, solidarity, and the common good.

Church social teaching summons “citizens to engage each other in moral dialogue about their deepest principles and the good of their communities rather than withdrawing into shallow personal concerns.” [*Church* 22:3 (Fall 2006): 5-8 at 8.]

In this vein, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* in its exposition of the nature of the political community correlates the social nature of men and women with the common good as a prerequisite to “a healthy social pluralism.” (CSDC n. 151) Political authority, in turn, has an incumbent responsibility to “guarantee an ordered and upright community life, without usurping the free activity of individuals and groups but disciplining and orienting this freedom, by respecting and defending the independence of the individual and social subjects, for the attainment of the common good.” (CSDC n. 394)

In addition, the *Compendium* asserts that “[t]he Church’s social doctrine sees ethical relativism, which maintains that there are no objective or universal criteria for establishing the foundations of a correct hierarchy of values, as one of the greatest threats to modern-day democracies.” (CSDC n. 407)

In the words of Pope Benedict XVI, because human rights are “the very substance of tolerance and freedom,” moral truth is “indispensable to democracy.”

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